

Jim Horn



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Senate committee
assignments:

- Highways and Transportation, chair
- Higher Education
- Government Operations and Elections

February 2004

2004 session update and survey results



Dear Friends,

The 2004 Legislature is well into its scheduled 60-day session, which began on Jan. 12. We've spent most of our time the past few weeks in committee meetings. In fact, the deadline for most Senate bills to pass out of their committee of origin is Feb. 6. The cutoff for Senate measures to be passed by the full Senate is Feb. 17. Once that deadline is passed, the Senate will consider those bills passed by the House, and the House will do the same with Senate bills that are still alive. The last day of session is March 11.

Last year, the Legislature dealt with several enormous issues, including passing a state operating budget that eliminated a \$2.6 billion deficit without resorting to a tax increase, and approving a 10-year transportation project and funding package to help us finally tackle traffic congestion. In fact, the transportation package was a key factor in Washington landing the Boeing 7E7 project, along with a tax incentive package for Boeing if it built the 7E7 in our state. Thanks to last year's "heavy lifting," a legislative course of action has been laid, and it's working according to plan. As a result, I expect few changes or fixes need to be made during this session.

That said, the key issues this session include passing the supplemental operating budget and supplemental transportation budget, finding an alternative to the state's popular blanket primary if the U.S. Supreme Court rules it unconstitutional, improving the state's jobs and business climate, improving K-12 and higher education and capping noneconomic damages for medical malpractice lawsuits.

This newsletter includes results from the presession survey that I sent to 41st District residents around Thanksgiving. Thanks to those who filled out and returned the survey.

If you have questions or comments about the survey results or the issues before the Legislature this year, please let me know.

As always, it is a privilege and honor to serve as your state senator.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jim Horn", written over a light blue background.

Sen. Jim Horn

Town hall meetings
Feb. 14
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Improving jobs/business climate continues to be key issue

Last year, the Legislature took positive steps to improve Washington's jobs and business climate, which in turn should help our state economy. However, we still have much to do to make Washington a friendlier place to do business:

Workers' compensation reform. The Department of Labor and Industries recently imposed a 9.8 percent average rate increase in its workers' compensation premiums for employers and workers for 2004. This is on top of the 29 percent average rate hike that L&I imposed for 2003. These extra costs on businesses and workers come at a time when the economy is finally showing signs of improving. Such increases likely will hurt job growth. Last year, the Senate passed a measure (ESSB 5378) to reform the state's workers' comp system so it becomes more stable and certain. That proposal is being brought up again for consideration this year.

Extending tax credits for high-tech R&D. In 1994, the Legislature enacted tax incentives for high-tech companies doing research and development on products. Since then, high-tech employment has more than doubled, from under 40,000 to 80,000. The tax incentives are set to expire this year. I support legislation to extend these tax incentives, especially since so many high-tech companies are located on the Eastside. It's very important to maintain them so our high-tech industry can continue to grow and produce innovative products. It would hurt this industry — and jobs — if we let these exemptions expire. Gov. Locke has stated his support for these tax exemptions, so I'm hopeful that they indeed will be extended.

Addressing higher education crisis

Our colleges and universities continue to play a major role in our state by educating thousands and thousands of Washington residents and by helping train students for jobs in our ever-evolving economy. A nearby example is Bellevue Community College, which continues to grow and play an important role in the Eastside. In fact, there is talk of expanding BCC to a four-year institution.

However, many experts say higher education in Washington is in a crisis. Our state's higher ed system faces two major problems: 1) access is dwindling due to greater enrollment pressure, with the college-age population (the "baby-boom echo") expected to peak in 2008; 2) due to state budget constraints, higher education funding has fallen in recent years, causing tuition to rise sharply.

The Legislature will have to look closely at possible solutions to improve access so more Washington residents can attend college or university. However, to do that, more funding will have to be found. The challenge here is how to accomplish that when the state budget still faces tight times.

One solution approved by the Legislature last year called for requiring colleges and universities to develop policies ensuring students complete their degree programs and graduate in a timely manner. The goal here is to create more enrollment slots for incoming students to help relieve our access problem.

Gov. Locke's budget proposal calls for \$30 million in new spending for higher education. That extra funding would be used to add more than 5,000 higher education enrollment slots and finance new campus buildings. Of the 5,000 enrollment slots added, about 3,000 would be in high-demand fields such as nursing and computer technology. In the coming weeks, the budget writers in the House and Senate will unveil their own supplemental budget plans.

The two likely options to solve our higher education problem — raise taxes or sharply raise tuition — won't be popular. As many of you have heard by now, the League of Education Voters possibly might try to put an initiative on the statewide ballot this year to raise \$1 billion for education, from preschool through college, by raising the state sales tax by 1 cent per dollar. The Governor's Competitiveness Council has also looked at possible recommendations to improve higher education.

Health care issues to address

Two other important issues for Senate Republicans deal with health care. One is fixing the state's small group health insurance market. State mandated health benefits have contributed to the rising cost of health insurance coverage for small businesses and other small groups. Because small businesses aren't required to offer employees health insurance, more and more are choosing to drop coverage altogether. Consumers are the big loser here.

Senate Republicans have a proposal (SB 5521) aimed at reducing costs and increasing access to small group plans. This measure reduces mandated benefits and allows for a more "bare-bones" package that can be tailored to meet the specific needs of employers and employees.

The other health care issue we hope to address is capping the excessive pain and suffering (noneconomic damage) awards that often result from malpractice lawsuits against doctors. As a result of these awards, doctors have seen their medical malpractice insurance rates skyrocket. Many doctors have responded by leaving the state or scaling back their practice. This affects patients because it threatens access to affordable health care.

Last year, the Senate passed a tort reform bill (ESSB 5728) that included placing a \$250,000 cap on noneconomic damages in cases of medical malpractice. The House didn't take action on the bill, which we are pushing this year.

2004 survey results

Before session began, I mailed a survey to people in the 41st Legislative District. I appreciate those who responded by filling out and returning the questionnaire to me. Here are the results:

2004 survey results

1. Which of the following issues do you feel are most important for the Legislature to address during the 2004 session? (Please rank according to importance with "1" being the most important, "2" being the next important, and so on.) (Results below reflect a weighted average.)

| | |
|--|------|
| 1. Economy and jobs | 7.38 |
| 2. Transportation | 7.35 |
| 3. Public schools | 6.67 |
| 4. Health care | 6.31 |
| 5. Taxes | 6.12 |
| 6. Colleges and universities | 5.64 |
| 7. Drugs and crime | 5.43 |
| 8. Environment | 5.12 |
| 9. Growth management | 5.04 |
| 10. Social issues | 3.74 |

Budget

2. In 2003, the Legislature used the Priorities of Government (POG) approach introduced by Gov. Locke to address the \$2.6 billion budget deficit without any general tax increase. The POG process meant ranking programs based on need. This resulted in a budget that lived within the state's means and delivered services based on priority without using a tax increase. Should the Legislature continue to use the POG approach in crafting future operating budgets?

| | |
|---------------|------------|
| Yes | 88 percent |
| No | 12 percent |

3. Should we re-enact the state spending limit that was created in 1993 when Washington voters passed Initiative 601 (which limits growth in the general fund budget to increases in population and inflation without a supermajority vote of the Legislature)?

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes. | 71 percent |
| No | 29 percent |

Elections

4. The Legislature was set to meet for a brief special session in early December to suspend the state's presidential primary election since the primary costs \$6 million to run and the results won't have any impact on the Republican and Democratic nominations in 2004. Do you agree it's a good idea for the Legislature to suspend the state's 2004 presidential primary?

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes. | 90 percent |
| No | 10 percent |

5. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled against Washington's popular 68-year-old blanket primary, in which voters are free to vote for one candidate from any party in each race. Many suspect that if our blanket primary is brought before the U.S. Supreme Court, it will be ruled unconstitutional. Because of fear that our blanket primary will be overturned before next September's primaries, the Legislature likely will adopt an alternative to the blanket primary. Below are two alternatives that are similar to proposals that were considered but not approved by the Legislature in 2001. The two alternatives below are the most commonly discussed replacements for the blanket primary. If the U.S. Supreme Court rules that our blanket primary is unconstitutional, which of these alternatives would you favor?

A modified "Montana primary" (or "open primary, private declaration" primary) in which voters privately choose a major party's ballot before they cast their vote; their choice of ballot is not recorded. Under this system, there is no party registration. This system respects a voter's privacy, but limits his or her choices to one party. This system ensures that one candidate from each major party advances to the general election. 43 percent

A modified "Louisiana primary" in which the top two vote getters in a primary move to the general election ballot regardless of party affiliation. Under this primary system, the ballots contain candidates from all parties. Voters can vote for candidates of any party for each office. Ballots are secret and no record of the voter's choice can be recorded. This system could result in having two candidates from the same party wind up in a general election, with no person from the opposite party in the general election. 47 percent
Some other alternative 10 percent

Education

6. The Marysville teachers strike recently ended after lasting a state-record 49 days. Although courts in Washington have ruled several times that teachers are public employees and therefore their strikes are illegal, there is no state law in statute explicitly prohibiting teachers strikes. Should there be a state law that explicitly prohibits teachers from striking?

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes. | 62 percent |
| No | 38 percent |

7. Starting in 2008, high school seniors will need to pass the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in their sophomore year in order to graduate from high school. Should we modify this requirement so high school seniors can still graduate if they don't pass the WASL or should we stay the course?

| | |
|---|------------|
| Modify the graduation requirement | 36 percent |
| Stay the course | 64 percent |

8. There are more people seeking access into colleges and universities in Washington than available enrollment slots. Should the state's colleges and universities be allowed to raise tuition so they can meet growing enrollment demand and continue to provide a high-quality education to students?

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes. | 69 percent |
| No | 31 percent |

9. Should Bellevue Community College be turned into a four-year university?

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes. | 61 percent |
| No | 39 percent |

10. Before this year, only the University of Washington and Washington State University could offer electrical engineering degrees. The 2003 Legislature passed a bill allowing all Washington colleges and universities to offer engineering programs as long as the Higher Education Coordinating Board approves the request. Should other colleges and universities in our state be allowed to offer degrees currently offered only by the UW and WSU?

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes. | 92 percent |
| No | 8 percent |

2004 survey results

Transportation

11. Leaders in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties are expected to create a list of regional transportation projects (such as I-405, Alaskan Way Viaduct, SR 520/Evergreen Floating Bridge, SR 167, SR 509, etc.) and a list of taxes to pay for these projects, and then place the project and funding plan on the ballot in 2004. Based on what you know about what might be included in such a proposal, how do you feel about the upcoming regional plan?

I very likely will support it 22 percent
 I probably will support it 28 percent
 I probably will oppose it 8 percent
 I very likely will oppose it 12 percent
 Don't know yet 30 percent

12. Last spring, the Legislature approved a 10-year, \$4.2 billion transportation funding package that included a 5-cent increase in the state gas tax. Money from the gas tax increase goes into a "Nickel Fund" and is spent on specific projects on a list created by the Legislature. Do you like what you see happening so far with the "Nickel Fund"?

Yes. 20 percent
 No 14 percent
 Too early to tell 66 percent

13. The state Transportation Commission is expected to ask the Legislature to ban the use of studded tires on Washington roads and highways, arguing that studded tires cause great damage to pavement. Do you think studded tires should be banned in our state?

Yes. 77 percent
 No 23 percent

14. Under a two-year pilot project by the Department of Transportation, the HOV lanes on State Route 167, SR 520 (east of Bellevue Way), Interstate 90 (east of Mercer Island) and I-405 are open to all traffic seven days a week between 7 p.m. and 5 a.m. Do you think this is a good idea?

Yes, in fact the hours open to all traffic should be expanded and include weekends 53 percent

Yes, but let's limit it to the pilot project 32 percent
 No 15 percent

Health care

15. Medical malpractice premiums have skyrocketed in recent years, causing some doctors to reduce their business hours and other doctors to close their practice altogether. Have you or any of your relatives or friends been affected by a shortage in a doctor's business hours or by fewer practicing doctors in an area?

Yes. 27 percent
 No 73 percent

16. Small group insurance premium prices have risen steadily in recent years largely because small group plans are required to carry certain types of coverage regardless of whether such coverage is needed. Have you or someone you know experienced rising small group insurance costs?

Yes. 53 percent
 No 47 percent

Town hall meetings planned for February 14

On Saturday, Feb. 14, Rep. Fred Jarrett and I will hold a series of town hall meetings throughout the 41st Legislative District. We'll talk about the key issues before the Legislature this session and what's happened so far in Olympia. Please join us at one of the meetings listed below.

Newcastle

9:30 a.m.-11 a.m.
 City Council
 Chambers
 Newcastle City Hall
 13020 SE 72nd
 Place

Bellevue

1 p.m.-2:30 p.m.
 City Council
 Chambers
 Bellevue City Hall
 11511 Main St.

Mercer Island

3:30 p.m.-5 p.m.
 City Council
 Chambers
 Mercer Island
 City Hall
 9611 SE 36th St.

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